THE LITERARY
Life

Home Improvement

REVISION AS RENOVATION

THE realtor said, "It's got good bones." That's what people say about ugly houses—and this was an ugly house. No one had done a thing to it since 1965, the year it was built. Every inch of the place was plastered with flocked or floral-patterned wallpaper, even the insides of the cabinets. All the light fixtures were white orbs collared by thin brass rings. The outside of the oven grew as hot as the inside. The master bedroom had curtains that matched its shaggy carpet that resembled in its color nothing so much as a mint green urinal puck. The roof was rotten and sagging. The furnace and gutters were rusted out.

But my wife and I walked through the backyard, a quarter acre of rich grass bordered by shade plants and mature ash trees whose branches came together overhead like a cathedral's roof. And we stood before the river-rock fireplaces and sat on the three-season porch and laid our hands flat along the walls and smiled as you would when rubbing a belly ripe with pregnancy. And bought the place.

This was April 2008, and we were shoving books into boxes, packing up the moving truck, when the phone rang with good news: I had sold my novel, *The Wilding*. My editor at Graywolf Press, Fiona McCrae, told me how excited she was about the manuscript, but wondered if I might be amenable to some changes. Of course, I said. What did she have in mind? "How about let's start with the point of view?" she said. "Might we shift it from first to third? And in doing so, with the freedom afforded to the characters, perhaps we could add five interlocking plotlines all coming to a head at once?" The book had good bones, in other words, but it needed some renovation.

Fiona has a British accent and somehow this makes everything she says sound reasonable. So I said, "Sure, no problem." And I meant it. I recognized the narrative as less of a novel and more of an extended short story, a *shnovel*. Here was the architectural solution, a new blueprint delivered from the contractor to the carpenter. I felt fired up, ready to flip open my toolbox and get to work. It wasn't until later, when I printed the manuscript and began to riffle through its pages, that I shuddered at the job ahead of me.

JENNIFER MAY

BENJAMIN PERCY is the author of a novel, *The Wilding*, forthcoming from Graywolf Press in the fall, and two books of stories, *Refresh, Refresh* (Graywolf Press, 2007) and *The Language of Elk* (Carnegie Mellon, 2006). He is a regular contributor of fiction and nonfiction to *Esquire*. His honors include a Whiting Writers' Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Plimpton Prize, and inclusion in Best American Short Stories. He teaches in the MFA program in creative writing and environment at Iowa State University.

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I'm no stranger to starting over. I wrote three failed novels before selling *The Wilding*. They were not a waste of time, not at all. I learned from them the humility that comes from watching something you've spent years working on turn to dust in your hands. And I discovered—by dissecting their cold carcasses—the many ways I might rob their organs and bones, their images and characters and settings and metaphors, and rearrange them, reimagine them, as short stories.

"Refresh, Refresh" is a good example. For my graduate thesis I wrote a (wretched) novel called "King of the Wild Frontier" (panned by students, faculty, agents, and editors alike). The fight scenes that appear in "Refresh, Refresh" are almost directly lifted from it, though their context couldn't be more different. Neither could the early and late drafts of the short story. Originally "Refresh, Refresh" was supernatural—my agent helped me transform it into scorched-earth realism. Originally it was forty pages—the *Paris Review* helped me winnow it down to eighteen. Originally the grandfather played a much larger role, and his subplot involved an amputated foot preserved in a bucket of formaldehyde—he ended up getting his own story, "The Killing" (which also recycles a number of scenes from "King of the Wild Frontier"). I could go on about the axed weight-lifting scenes, the three boys who became two, the brain-damaged vet, Floyd, who every night set up his karaoke machine outside the Dairy Queen and served as a kind of Greek chorus. Gone.

So much of revision, I've discovered, is about coming to terms with that word: *gone*. Letting things go. When revising, the beginning writer spends hours consulting the thesaurus, replacing a period with a semicolon, cutting adjectives, adding a few descriptive sentences—whereas the professional writer mercilessly lops off limbs, rips out innards like party streamers, drains away gallons of blood, and then calls down the lightning to bring the body back to life.

Revision doesn't come easy. That's why I used to resist it. When I received comments on my work, my eyes skimmed over the criticism and homed in on the compliments. That's no way to be. You've got to write every day as if you were clocking in for a job. Or if not every day, then damn near it. If you're not disciplined in your production—if you're writing only when the mood strikes or when a deadline looms—then naturally you'll be more protective of your work so that when it comes time to cut, your saw will tremble with hesitation. But if you're producing reams of pages you'll be less resistant to revision, because you know it won't be long before another load of timber comes down the road.

I discovered this in grad school, when writing became a full-time job and when critiques became sharp toothed, long nailed. One time a professor handed me back a manuscript with every single page slashed through with an enormous black *X*. There were no comments except a single word scrawled over the title: *Don't*.

When I later spoke to the professor, I pushed him further, asking what he meant, exactly. Don't what? Don't bother? Was the story no good? No, he said. That wasn't it. He liked the story—"Just *don't* write it that way." His advice served as an eraser. I pretended the original document no longer existed, and when I began another draft, it filled up a clean white screen unchained from the rusted-out sentences written previously.

I have thrown away thousands of pages—and sometimes you need to do that—sometimes you have to start over. But sometimes you don't. Sometimes your story needs some serious renovation—the walls are full of mold, the roof is leaking—and sometimes it simply needs some cosmetic work, a little paint splashed on the walls.

I've learned that revision is far less intense and traumatic when I begin a

story with its end in mind. I used to be an organic writer, who had no game plan, who followed tooth-and-claw instinct, who considered writing an act of discovery. I let the garden grow and returned to it later to trim back the tangles, rip out the weeds. Dan Chaon—the author of such dynamite collections as *Among the Missing*—is such a writer. For every fifteen-page short story, he produces more than a hundred pages. His stories "Big Me" and "The Bees" went through so many drafts that he "would have probably been better off writing a novel," he says. Sometimes he lays the pages down on the floor and wanders among them, rearranging them, isolating some scenes, crumpling up others and tossing them aside, until finally he decides what the story is *about* and returns to his desk to realize the piece in a shorter form.

On the other end of the spectrum is the Lego-block writer. He has his design in mind and snaps each piece into place and takes pleasure in how tidily everything comes together. I've tried this, too, and though it might work for some, for me it made the act of writing feel lifeless, boring.

I now fall somewhere between these two categories. I know my ending—maybe not everything about it, but generally where things will end up, what will happen—and I know one or two scenes that occur in the middle. In aiming toward them, I take far fewer wrong turns.

I used to consider editing something you did once a story was completed. I now begin each day by reading what I have already written. If it's a short story, I mean from the first line forward. If a novel, I mean from the start of the chapter I'm working on. I sometimes spend hours editing before I shift to an imaginative mode and begin to punch out new material. So I'm essentially in a constant state of revision, and by the time I finish the story, I might have edited it two dozen times, turning it over and over in my hands, sanding it until it's free of slivers.

Faulkner said, "Kill your darlings," and in that tradition I created a cemetery folder. In it I have files—tombstones, I call them—with titles like "Images" or "Metaphors" or "Characters" or "Dialogue." Into these I dump and bury anything excised from a story. For some reason, having a cemetery makes it easier to cut, to kill. Perhaps it's because I know the writing isn't lost—it has a place—and I can always return to the freshly shoveled grave and perform a voodoo ceremony.

It took me a year to rewrite *The Wilding*, to move from first to third person, to free up those characters and braid together their stories. And when I handed it in to Fiona in March 2009, she said—again, with a British accent—"Fantastic. Exactly what we wanted. Now would you mind cutting several of these subplots? And maybe we could add another in a female perspective? And while we're at it, how about let's rethink the ending?" And, and, and.

And then I got back to work.

I was hammering at the keyboard all week, and hammering at my house all weekend. I ripped out the carpeting and wrenched out the thousands of tacks and staples, to reveal gleaming hardwood. I scored the wallpaper and sprayed it with hot, soapy water and scraped—and scraped—and scraped away damp bits of paper, leaving the drywall beneath pitted. So I mudded and sanded and textured and painted. I tossed out the oven. I tossed out the curtains. I unscrewed the cracked, yellowing outlets and light switches and replaced them with white plates and once shocked myself so badly that my thumbnail bled and turned black. I pulled out the brass and shoved in wrought-iron light fixtures. We had a new roof thrown on, new gutters hung.

Not long ago, our realtor stopped by to check on us. He shook my hand—a hand yellowed with calluses and crosshatched with scrapes, colored with bruises. He hardly recognized the house just as I hardly recognize the novel as it has moved from first to final draft. "You've been working hard," he said, and I said, "Yes."

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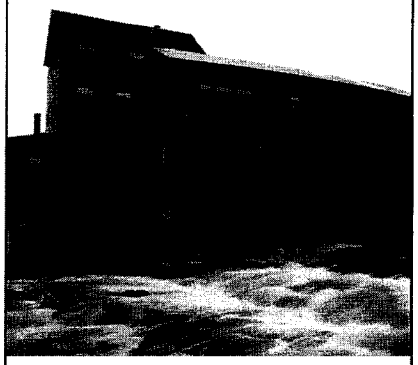

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